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AUTHOR Strusinski, Marianne
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ABSTRACT

During the 1987-88 school year, the notion of school-based management (SBM) was introduced in selected schools in the Dade County (Florida) Public Schools. The paper discusses the changes that are occurring in the shared decision-making (SDM) body of the SBM project over time. In June 1989, schools participating in the SBM program completed a form called the "cadre narrative", which contained a set of six questions. Of the 33 participating schools, 30 submitted their cadre narrative on time. Three questions were chosen for analysis: (1) additional staff training needs; (2) efforts geared toward maintaining or enhancing participation in the shared decision making; and (3) changes/refinements made to the SDM since its inception. Although staff have been attending a variety of training workshops, responses indicate there are still areas that need to be addressed. The most frequently cited categories of training needs were professional skills and working in groups. Teachers are identifying needs associated with various management skills, an area traditionally lacking in their professional training and experience. Also, over 10 percent of the schools listed personal issues, such as stress management and burnout, as a training need. If only a few teachers are carrying the majority of the SDM load, burnout can be an important consideration. Other findings are discussed, along with recommendations for schools desiring to develop SDM programs. (MLH)

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THE EVOLUTION OF SHARED DECISION MAKING IN SCHOOL-BASED MANAGEMENT

presented by:

Marianne Strusinski, MSW, MPH
Dade County Public Schools
Miami, FLorida

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Statement of Purpose

The 1987-88 school year brought radical changes to the Dade County Public School (DCPS) System. That year the notion of School-Based Management (SBM) was introduced in selected schools. The purpose of this paper is to present the changes that are occurring in the shared decision making body of the SBM project over time. In order to do this, background information on the DCPS and the SBM program will be reviewed. A description of the data this paper is based upon will follow. Finally, conclusions and recommendations will be posited.

Description

DCPS is the fourth largest school district in the nation with 263 schools spread across a large metropolitan area. The system serves over 280,000 students from diverse ethnic backgrounds. The system is growing by about 4% each school year, the result of both growth and an influx of refugees.

The concept of SBM represents a diversion of the dominant model of decision making at the school level. Traditionally, such power is in the hands of the principal. SBM seeks to involve school staff in the decision making process. This is achieved primarily through the formation of a Shared Decision Making (SDM) body. The SDM, at its most fundamental, is composed of school staff and includes teachers and other professional staff. Their task is to make decisions on various operational situations at the school.

The composition and nature of the SDM is dependent upon the individual school. In some schools, membership is comprised of representatives of the school's instructional staff. In other schools, paraprofessionals and ancillary staff (e.g., custodial and cafeteria workers) are also included. At least one administrator is included. However, whether administrative representatives have veto power on SDM decisions varies. Some schools limit decisions to those that directly affect students and curriculum. Other schools extend decision making to the overall budget and hiring of staff. Variability is also seen in the names given to the SDM.

The SDM, regardless of its name, seeks input from the staff and plans projects, that, hopefully, will have a favorable impact on students. These special projects form the second major ingredient in the formula that is school-based management. The scope and number of projects at a school also varies. They generally range from four to twelve.

The individualized approach to SBM in the school system yields even more diversity in the schools' projects. Many center on curriculum issues. Examples of this include the models to teach Spanish and computer skills. Other projects deal with organizational aspects of instruction such as scheduling classes in a

more unified fashion, converting one teacher unit into four part-time teachers' aides positions, and providing increased counseling and tutoring services to students. Still others involve physical plant renovations and an in-school television system. Thus, the underlying philosophy of the SBM program at DCPS is to let the individual school determine the exact nature and extent of their program. In this manner, creativity is fostered.

Such diversity in individual programs is a direct result of the approach taken by the administration in planning the SBM. During the planning stages schools were told to "reach for the sky" and design programs based upon their "wish list". The only guidelines that were given were to create a SDM and at least one project. In some cases, workshops were held to discuss the concept of school-based management but these attempts were rudimentary and theoretical in nature. Thus, the school personnel planning their programs had no practical experience to draw upon. Planning was done in a vacuum. The result was that the first few years of the program was characterized by much refinement. For the individual projects, this was a relatively easier task. For example school personnel quickly saw that hallways and transportation vehicles were very overcrowded when a common dismissal time was initiated. This led to 5-minute staggering of dismissal times the following year. In this case, evaluation was "common sense" with immediate and tangible feedback provided. The refinement process of the SDM was much more elusive and ethereal and thus, posed even greater challenges to school staff. It is this refinement process, or evolution of the SDM that is the topic under study in this paper.

Methods and Findings

In June, 1989 schools participating in the SBM program completed a form referred to as the cadre narrative. This form was essentially a set of six questions to be answered based on the schools' past two years of experiences with SDM. Of the 33 schools originally participating in the SBM a total of 30 submitted their cadre narrative in a timely fashion. Responses to three of the questions were analyzed utilizing content analysis techniques. The three questions chosen for the analysis included: 1) additional training needs of staff, 2) efforts geared toward maintaining or enhancing participation in the SDM, and 3) changes/refinements made to the SDM since its inception. The results of the analyses follow.

Since the inception of the SBM program selected school staff have attended workshops each semester. These workshops attempted to meet the varied needs of staff in implementing their SBM program. The topics are varied but generally deal with various management and evaluation topics. While some workshops were offered to everyone, generally staff had some discretion over which workshops to attend. Thus, each school's staff sought out most workshops based according to their perceived need.

While this model provided the most flexibility, responses to the cadre narrative indicate that there are still significant areas that need to be addressed. The most frequently cited category of training needs can be referred to as professional skills. Indeed, there were twenty-nine responses in this category alone. Almost one-third of the responses in this category asked for more training in the SDM process. This would appear to be a rather global and yet fundamental concept. It is interesting to note that this finding came after two full years of participation in the SBM program.

The next most frequently cited need was in budgeting, followed by leadership, time management decision making and professionalism. While it is easy to understand how each of these topics are necessary to effective management in the schools they are areas traditionally not taught to teachers in the course of their professional training. Neither are these skills likely to be learned on the job when looking at the traditional duties of teachers.

The second most frequent category of training needs refers to working in groups. Here, one-third of the schools indicated a need for learning more about group process with communication a close second, followed by conflict resolution. Once again, these topics are not routinely found in teacher training programs. Nor are they skills that teachers learn in the course of the professional lives. After all, teachers may meet each other for lunch or maybe even have common planning periods but the bulk of their day is spent behind closed doors in a self-contained room where they operate autonomously.

Thus, teachers are identifying needs associated with various management skills, something they traditionally lack in their professional training and experience. Perhaps an outgrowth of these findings lead into the third major category of responses found in the cadre narrative. Over 10% of the schools listed personal issues as an area they felt they needed training in. Personal issues include stress management and burnout. As a consultant to some of the schools in the SBM program, this researcher has noticed a very high degree of stress among those staff that are participating in the SDM. Not infrequently, meetings are marked by tension and negativeness as teachers strive to become effective managers with little or no background in management techniques. Stress, when present, must be addressed because it can undermine the success and satisfaction associated with this or any program.

Another observation noted by this researcher is the phenomenon of teacher burnout which was also mentioned under personal issues. Quite frequently, the responsibilities for the SDM fall on the few who choose to undertake the tasks. The demands of SDM are great and if only a few teachers are carrying the majority of the load it is quite easy to burnout. Personal issues such as stress and burnout may be a result of poor management skills. The inter-

mingling of management skills and personal issues points out the need for comprehensive support for the teachers and other staff working in SBM schools.

The phenomenon of a few teachers carrying the majority of the workload associated with SBM/SDM leads to the second area of analysis and that is the methods used to enhance or maintain participation in the SDM. Naturally, the more staff involved in SDM the lighter the workload for each person. Perhaps this is the driving philosophy behind the finding that most efforts were directed toward involving more staff in the SDM process and increasing awareness of the SDM activities. Two-thirds of the schools said they were concentrating efforts around this goal. The most frequent methods to achieve this goal were to provide inservices for staff, hold open meetings of the SDM and also to hold retreats. "Spreading the word" therefore, was considered a worthwhile effort. What is needed in order to achieve this is communication skills and techniques associated with group process -- two areas of need with regard to training, as mentioned previously.

The second most frequent category of activities designed to maintain or enhance participation in the SDM concerned the membership itself. One-third of the schools used a committee system to share the workload among a greater number of staff. Rotating membership was used to a lesser extent as well as enlarging the SDM.

Finally, SDM operations and rules were modified as a way to maintain or enhance participation in the SDM. Twenty percent of the schools advertised meetings and minutes. To a lesser extent meeting schedules were adjusted and staff were compensated either in-kind or monetarily for time devoted to the SDM.

The efforts made to maintain or enhance participation in the SDM can be seen as purposeful changes to the schools' original concept of SDM. But there were other changes made in the SDM as well, based upon schools' responses to the third question under analysis here. This question asked the staff to list any change that had occurred in the SDM for the first two years of the program. Nearly all the schools indicated that various procedures were modified. The most frequent response given was that meetings became more efficient. As noted in the presentation of the training needs data, it is reasonable to expect a refinement process that occurs as staff skills and experiences grow. In some cases, schools developed by-laws, sometimes meeting times were adjusted. In a few cases the SDM took on more responsibilities as time went on. This was most frequently seen in the areas of budgeting and personnel.

Another major area of change was in information sharing. With time, staff saw the benefit in posting agendas and distributing minutes faster. One school even started a newsletter. Membership also changed as twenty percent of the schools indicated that

parent and/or student representation was sought. Finally, the structure the SDM was changed to include a committee system or to combine meetings.

Conclusions and Recommendations

While the data presented above represents responses to three discrete questions on the cadre narrative there is much interrelatedness and overlapping. The areas of need with regard to training do impact on the methods used to maintain or enhance staff participation which, in turn, result in adjustments made to the SDM over time. Perhaps what is most important is that a comprehensive view must be adopted when looking at the development of SDM. Therefore, the following recommendations are posited:

1) Thoughtful pre-planning is necessary in order to provide staff with the requisite understanding of the functioning of the shared decision making body. Data obtained from the cadre narrative indicate that skills are needed in areas that are beyond the domain of traditional teaching methods, i.e., professional and group skills.

2) Intensive workshops need to supplement the planning process during the development of the SDM. Workshops should address professional/managerial skills, group/communication skills and stress.

3) It should be expected that during the initial phases of the program adjustments will have to be made as new experiences dictate.

4) As experience with school-based management and share decision making grows, school staff should be given somewhat more structure in the design of their individual programs rather than just being told to "reach for the sky".

5) Finally, there should be ongoing, formative research in the field to assist both original participants and future participants in designing effective school-based management and shared decision making programs.